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AUTHOR Jennings, Isabel Y.
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ABSTRACT

The "Silent Interview" provides an effective ice-breaking exercise for the first day of composition class and also triggers learning strategies toward writing effectively. At the first class meeting, students are asked to work in pairs, exchanging questions and responses in writing until six or eight questions have been asked and answered. Students then write a paragraph about their partner, using the replies as data or ideas for the paragraph. Paragraphs are then exchanged for correction and read to the class if time permits. This exercise: (1) incorporates group learning; (2) provides an authentic topic and natural motivation; (3) requires critical thinking skills; and (4) creates a non-threatening ambience wherein teacher's presence and role are non-intrusive and non-interfering. Complete directions for the exercise are included. (Contains 15 references.) (NH)

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Silent Interview: An Ice-Breaker Triggering Learner Strategies Toward Effective Writing *

by

Isabel Y. Jennings, Ph. D.

The first day of class can be a threatening and most uncomfortable experience for both teachers and students, yet it is the most important one because what transpires in those first fifty minutes will set the pace, mood, and student attitudes and performance for the rest of the semester.

Teachers resort to all kinds of ice-breaking techniques. Three of the more common ones are self introduction, group work, and interview. Self introduction often creates anxiety and embarrassment. Getting students to work in groups does not always turn out successfully; the shy students never speak and the more aggressive ones cannot keep quiet. The regular interview, which is primarily oral and usually between the teacher and the student, functions more as feedback of students' biographical data or of oral communication skill rather than as a learning tool to introduce writing.

In writing classes which urge that writing skills be developed through actual writing and as early in the program as possible, neither of the above ice-breaking techniques has direct applicability. The Silent Interview, borrowing the best of both techniques (interview and group work) and adding the element of writing, goes beyond ice-breaking to trigger learner strategies toward writing effectively. Following is a description of the procedure.

At the first class meeting, each student is asked to:

1. take out a piece of paper and pen or pencil
2. turn to the student beside him/her to pair off with
3. write a question (Q #1) on his/her own paper on any topic s/he wants the partner to answer
4. exchange paper with partner
5. read the question on the partner's paper and write the answer to it
6. exchange paper again

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7. read partner's response and write another question (Q #2) based on or related to the response
8. exchange paper again for a reply to the second question
9. repeat the whole process until six to eight questions have been asked and answered
10. go over all the answers to the six or eight questions asked and write a paragraph, using the replies as data or ideas for the paragraph
11. exchange paper, after the paragraph has been completed, for correction of information
12. (time permitting) volunteer to read the paragraph orally or write it on the board for class comment and discussion, otherwise hand it in

[NOTE: the students are asked to (a) refrain from talking throughout the exercise; and (b) make sure that they write the questions on their own paper and respond to questions on their partners' paper.]

The Silent Interview's Question/Answer format not only breaks the ice, it also diminishes communication apprehension by offering the students a less intimidating learning situation through shared activity and equal opportunity to express themselves.

The growing interest in considering the learning task from the learners' point of view has shifted the focus from a teacher-oriented to a student-oriented classroom. This calls for more active participation of the learners in the learning process. The teacher's charge is to provide situations and tasks that encourage students to be self-reliant and responsible for their own learning, thereby setting in motion learner strategies to meet the challenge. The silent interview is a task that transfers the responsibility for learning to the students. The students are self-directed -- they decide on a subject on which they want more information and they choose the manner of asking for it.

Research has shown that group learning makes for a powerful pedagogy and, used properly, can be highly effective. The helplessness and apprehension students feel in class, especially on the first day, can be diminished when students are made active particicipants in a common task, sharing strategies and supporting each other. However, collaborative work often can get out of hand, resulting in disarray, noisy confusion, and further frustration. Silent Interview prevents such problems from occurring - first, because no words are ever heard, the noise level is zero; and second, because the one-to-one set-up focuses the students' attention on the

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reciprocal sending and receiving of messages of particular interest to them, order is maintained.

The problem arising from having different kinds of students in class, such as shy and aggressive, beginning and experienced, and older and younger, is solved by the silent interview. Quietly working in pairs gives each partner equal opportunity for self expression -- the shy ones will have to ask and answer questions as often as the aggressive ones, and the aggressive ones have no opportunity to control the situation because their questions and answers depend on those of their partners. Pairing seems to inspire tolerance, so the more experienced partner appears more understanding of the shortcomings of his or her partner.

One of the difficult aspects of writing for most students is getting started, that is, actually beginning the opening sentence. Being assigned a specific topic, especially one they know so little about, further complicates the problem and immobilizes instead of motivating. However, personal and authentic topics that demand clarification or elaboration are very helpful; they prod the students to ask questions. The Silent Interview, by its very nature, offers from the beginning a collaborative situation, and a special question-answer activity. Moreover, since the subject matter is one of their own choosing, the students' enthusiasm to gather more information is real. Furthermore, because the exchange is written, it launches the students toward actual writing at the outset.

The writing process involves several stages: (a) topic selection, that is, getting an idea to write about, (b) data collecting, that is, getting supporting ideas for the topic, (c) text unity and coherence realization, that is, insuring that the ideas follow each other in some order or that they evolve from each other, and (d) product refinement, that is, checking and rechecking the draft to catch and change any thinking and mechanical errors. Silent Interview, in a capsule, covers and provides for all these stages. The students, themselves, extract the topics from their own experiences and interests; the question-answer interchange generates ideas that are supportive of and related to the topic. Since subequent questions are built on the response immediately preceding them and are logically connected to that response in meaning and essence, coherence is achieved and guaranteed.

As the participants in the silent interview interact with one another by trying out and exchanging ideas, and as they react to the topic under consideration, questioning and clarifying it, then they are performing a kind of critical thinking

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as they try to produce drafts worth sharing with others.

The final written paragraphs, revised and edited by the students themselves, become valuable diagnostic samples by which teachers can assess the linguistic knowledge of the students -- vocabulary and syntactic fluency -- as well as their control of grammar rules and mechanics of writing.

Students' own linguistic resources and potential are often not revealed in their compositions. One of the main reasons is that because they are frequently asked to pattern their compositions after those of professional writers, they are made to feel that their own experiences are not acceptable as topics. However, Silent Interview, which insists that students draw topics from their personal experiences and later compare their compositions with one another, activates learner strategies.

In creating a comfortable, non-threatening ambience wherein teacher's presence and role are non-intrusive and non-interfering, Silent Interview encourages students to participate willingly in their own writing development. Therefore, teachers must (a) provide a learning instrument that will help the students get started, generate ideas and structures, and write effectively on their own; and (b) offer less intimidating learning situations that help students find their own topics, and allow them to develop and apply their own ways of ordering these ideas.

Silent Interview, as an ice-breaking, collaborative learning activity, shows promise not only in prompting learners strategies, but also in engendering a sense of achievement and self-confidence. It is predicated on some commonsense pedagogical principles: (a) the most effective learning occurs when students are allowed to build on what they already know and can do well, (b) students can take responsibility for their own learning when they are involved as active learners in small groups, and (c) teachers can best facilitate learning when they provide situations and tasks that foster self-reliance and ultimately develop learner autonomy. In eliminating the coercive atmosphere, Silent Interview "jump starts" student recognition of their responsibility for their own learning thereby triggering learner strategies, as well as "break the ice."

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